

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HANOI 000174

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV, H
STATE PASS USAID FOR ANE: AFERRARA DMCLUSKEY

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [OREP](#) [PHUM](#) [ETRD](#) [EAID](#) [VM](#) [RELFREE](#) [HUMANR](#) [HIV](#) [AIDS](#)
SUBJECT: STAFFDEL MCCORMICK'S TRIP TO HANOI: EXPANDING
THE U.S.-VIETNAM RELATIONSHIP

REF A: 03 HANOI 842 B: 03 HANOI 3373

1. SUMMARY: During Staffdel McCormick's official meetings January 6-8 with the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), National Assembly (NA), Government Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA), and Office of the Government (OOG), the delegation agreed on the value of an expanded U.S.-Vietnam relationship but expressed concerns about human rights and religious freedom. In addition, the delegation met with the American Chamber of Commerce, Asia Foundation, the USAID-funded Support for Trade Acceleration (STAR) project, and United Nations Development Program (UNDP). END SUMMARY.

2. A bi-partisan Congressional staff delegation led by James McCormick, Staff Director of the House International Relations Committee's (HIRC) Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, visited Hanoi January 6-8 to meet with GVN officials and representatives of development assistance organizations. The delegation also included: John Walker Roberts, Deputy Chief of Staff, HIRC; Peter Yeo, Minority Deputy Chief of Staff, HIRC; and, Douglas Anderson, Counsel, HIRC Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific. The stop in Hanoi followed four days in Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang, Hue, and Quang Tri (see septels). In Hanoi, the Staffdel met with Vice Foreign Minister Nguyen Phu Binh, Vice Chairwoman of the NA's Economic and Budget Committee Duong Thu Huong, Vice Chairwoman of the NA's Foreign Affairs Committee Ton Nu Thi Ninh, CRA Chairman Ngo Yen Thi, and Vice Minister of the OOG Nguyen Quoc Huy.

A NEW PHASE OF THE RELATIONSHIP

3. Every Vietnamese interlocutor commented on the importance of the U.S.-Vietnam relationship, with VFM Binh calling the U.S. one of Vietnam's "top partners." Both sides noted recent positive developments in the relationship. VFM Binh also stated that the expansion of military-to-military cooperation, as evidenced by the recent visit by the Vietnamese Minister of Defense to the U.S. and the U.S. ship visit to Vietnam, would continue. He asserted that the Vietnamese would participate in U.S. military programs. However, this development would depend upon Vietnamese public opinion, and contentious issues in the relationship might affect it, he noted.

4. Other new areas of cooperation, including the counter-narcotics agreement signed during Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan's recent visit to the U.S., were touched upon in the meeting with OOG Vice Minister Huy, who also said that he welcomed negotiations on a framework agreement on assistance and wanted to establish a framework to determine long-term cooperation. VFM Binh separately suggested that cooperation expand to other areas, including education, Vietnamese MIAs, and agent orange.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

5. The Staffdel consistently raised U.S. concerns regarding human rights and religious freedom in Vietnam. Members stressed that increased access and provision of more accurate information could ensure that future misunderstandings are avoided. While acknowledging the long-term positive trends, they emphasized that improvements must be made regarding problematic individual cases. VFM Binh responded that the GVN welcomes questions, comments, and criticism and allows visits to sensitive areas. When it hears reports that the police are abusing ethnic minorities, the GVN investigates and "punishes" officials, he claimed.

6. Vice Chairwoman Ninh commented that there are simply certain issues on which the U.S. and Vietnam will not agree. VFM Binh separately remarked that the values and traditions of the U.S. and Vietnam differ. Vietnam attaches more importance to community interests than to individual ones. It has thus targeted much of its efforts at poverty reduction, using its small state budget to assist the poor and disadvantaged, especially

in mountainous areas. VFM Binh asserted that, because the GVN recognizes the difficulties of ethnic minorities, it gives them preferences in areas such as higher education and government employment. Regarding religion, he stated that pre-1945 in the North and pre-1975 in the South, many conflicts took place due to discrimination by government administrations. By contrast, he claimed that there have been no conflicts since.

17. Various Vietnamese officials emphasized that the number of religious followers has been rapidly growing in recent years. CRA Chairman Thi further explained that the GVN's official policy is to encourage religions to grow, because religion is an "important part" of the people's spiritual life. He stressed that the GVN respects religious freedoms and must "take care" of religions. Furthermore, he stated that the GVN policy is in line with the international covenants and treaties of which it is a party. VFM Binh admitted that the GVN is not "perfect" on these issues and that there is room for improvement. Furthermore, the implementation of some GVN policies is not always as it wishes, he added.

18. Various GVN officials attributed the 2001 unrest in the central highlands to land disputes, mismanagement by local officials, and "foreign forces" who took advantage of the situation to encourage separatism. CRA Chairman Thi further stated that the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) had acted "incorrectly" by recognizing churches without consulting with local officials and by appointing untrained clergy. VFM Binh asserted that the GVN reacted "calmly," not repressing demonstrations and only arresting "separatists." Chairman Thi stressed that action had to be taken against churches in order to end the separatist movement. Unfortunately, he said, there was some confusion between those churches involved in the movement and those not. The GVN does not have a policy to take "harsh" actions against churches, he emphasized. Of those closed, twenty-four have since reopened. Last year, Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung visited the central highlands and churches. Chairman Thi stated that he expected all religious activities in this area to return to "normal" soon.

19. Chairman Thi also discussed the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). He claimed that the GVN has taken a "soft" approach even though this organization affects the unity and solidarity of Buddhism in Vietnam. Regarding Thich Huyen Quang, Chairman Thi asserted that the GVN had reached out to him during a productive meeting between him and the Prime Minister (ref A). However, Chairman Thi claimed that Thich Huyen Quang took actions immediately after this exchange that went against the pledge of improved Buddhist unity, even participating in "illegal activities." Although the GVN respects the right of all Vietnamese to follow their faith, it has its own regulatory framework, and violators must be treaded in accordance with the law, he insisted.

110. Responding to a question about the number of Catholic clergy being trained (septel), Chairman Thi listed the number of clergy recently appointed, promoted, and trained. He asserted that the supply of clergy depends upon the capacity of each religion and that the GVN does not intervene. Those with a longer history in Vietnam, such as the Buddhist church, have better training schools and institutions. Regardless, all religions are allowed to open schools and publish materials.

111. In response to the delegation's reference to recently convicted activist/journalist Nguyen Vu Binh (ref B) and conveyance of a copy of a letter from Representative Tom Lantos (D-CA), VFM Binh promised to "take note" of this case. At the same time, he asserted that the courts only deal with those who have violated Vietnamese laws. He acknowledged that there are some prohibitions in Vietnamese law that do not exist in other countries. Still, providing "untrue" information to those outside Vietnam violated Vietnamese law, according to VFM Binh. VFM Binh, Vice Chairwoman Ninh, and Vice Minister Huy separately emphasized that they would all like more visits and discussion on the issues of religious freedom and human rights. VFM Binh further stated that he hopes the problems between the U.S. and Vietnam can be settled through dialogue.

112. During a breakfast with the American Chamber of Commerce, American businessmen and NGO representatives also raised human rights and religious freedom. Amcham members expressed worry about Congressional legislation on these matters, stating that it could affect their work in Vietnam. Furthermore, they argued that the problems are "limited." Citing personal experiences, they spoke about their ability to worship freely in Vietnam. Many also stated that Vietnamese colleagues and friends expressed little interest in this subject and did not

feel their rights restricted. Several Amcham members, many of whom have been in Vietnam for almost ten years, further commented that the human rights and religious freedom situation in Vietnam has continuously improved.

DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

13. In meetings with representatives of the Asia Foundation, USAID-funded STAR project, and UNDP, the delegation learned about the many ways that assistance is being used to move Vietnam in a positive manner. According to Asia Foundation Rep Jonathan Stromseth, among numerous other projects, the Foundation is working to improve the administrative capacity of provincial governments. USAID-funded STAR project director Steve Parker noted that his program noted that STAR is assisting Vietnam in implementing the U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA). Collectively this comprehensive agreement and the STAR project, which requires Vietnam not only to liberalize its market but also to increase transparency and intellectual property rights protection, are bringing about real changes in Vietnam, he said. Designed as a demand-driven program, STAR responds to GVN requests for assistance in implementing the BTA. He stressed that real GVN commitment thus exists for executing STAR's recommendations. Working with more than forty agencies, STAR has affected changes in areas such as the publication of laws, and is currently working with the GVN to create an administrative appeal procedure, he noted.

14. UNDP's far-reaching activities in Vietnam include significant work on HIV/AIDS. In a long conversation on this topic (see septel regarding the delegation's visit to an anonymous testing site in Ho Chi Minh City), UNDP's Resident Representative Jordan Ryan explained the fundamental shift in GVN attitudes on this subject that has occurred over the past six months. It would appear that many Ministries are beginning to understand that this disease could have a devastating impact if it remains unchecked. Still, both the delegation and UNDP expressed their concern regarding a recent GVN decision to eliminate the National AIDS Standing Bureau and make Ministry of Health the lead agency on this subject.

15. This cable was cleared by James McCormick.

BURGHARDT